

Kevin Giles and Jim Anderson, *Star Tribune*

Democrat McCollum denounces the Republican's proposed environmental exemption for the \$700 million project.

A decades-long fight over a \$700 million, four-lane bridge that would span one of the region's most scenic waterways grew even more confrontational Tuesday when two Minnesota congresswomen clashed over proposed legislation.

Republican Rep. Michele Bachmann introduced a bill on Tuesday that would allow a new St. Croix River bridge despite a recent National Park Service ruling that the proposed bridge would violate the U.S. Wild and Scenic Rivers Act.

Her bill drew immediate fire from Democratic Rep. Betty McCollum, who serves a bordering district and said she would "do everything in my power" to defeat what she said amounts to an exemption from existing law on a protected river.

Planning for the proposed bridge, long under discussion to replace the 80-year-old Stillwater Lift Bridge, came to a halt in October when the Park Service ruled that the bridge violated federal law and would harm the river's scenic and recreational qualities.

Bachmann's support of a public works project that critics consider excessively costly -- a four-lane bridge currently being built over the Mississippi River at Hastings is expected to cost \$120 million -- also led to allegations of so-called earmark spending from advocacy organizations that oppose a large bridge.

Bachmann, in an interview on Tuesday, said such criticism comes from "radical environmental groups" who she said are responsible for adding \$500 million to the bridge's cost because of lawsuits and delays. Her bill isn't an earmark because it doesn't call for spending, she said. Money to pay for the bridge would be determined later by Minnesota and Wisconsin state governments and the federal government, she said.

"You build for the future," Bachmann said in defense of the current bridge proposal. "You don't build to create a problem. It would be nonsensical to build a bridge that would cause bottlenecks on either side of the river."

Part of the majority

"It's the recycling of a proposal that was soundly rejected," said McCollum, who wants a smaller and more affordable bridge. "The question is, where does the \$700 million come from? We need to look at that whole river corridor, we need to be cost-effective, we need to be prudent with taxpayers' dollars."

Bachmann's 42-word bill backs the current four-lane bridge proposal that was approved by the Park Service in 2005. She introduced a similar bill a year ago, but it drew no co-sponsors and no action was taken. But Bachmann now is part of the House majority and she has two co-sponsors: Rep. Sean Duffy, a Republican who represents northwestern Wisconsin, and Rep. Ron Kind, a Democrat who represents southwestern Wisconsin.

McCollum denounced the proposed bridge as "excessive and irresponsible" in light of budget troubles in Minnesota and Wisconsin.

"Frankly, the prospect of such legislation becoming law is negligible, which makes such a strategy more of a political distraction than a real transportation solution," McCollum wrote to the St. Croix County, Wis., Board of Supervisors. That board passed a resolution in January supporting an exemption for the bridge. Minnesota's Washington County board did the same on Tuesday in a 5-0 vote.

Last week, Gov. Mark Dayton said "all possibilities have been reopened for consideration" in the bridge debate. His statement suggested room for fresh alternatives to the current four-lane proposal.

Bridge supporters argue that the population has grown and that opponents are ignoring environmental harm to Stillwater as thousands of vehicles idle waiting to cross the Lift Bridge.

Soon after Bachmann introduced the bill, the national American Rivers advocacy group condemned her for promoting an "earmark for a massive freeway." The Bachmann bill would create a legal loophole that puts other federally protected rivers nationwide in jeopardy, said Rebecca Wodder, the group's president.

'Flat out false'

In response, Bachmann said Wodder's statement contained "flat out false statements."

Kind, in a statement, said that "it's critical that we move forward." The Lift Bridge, he said, "is functionally deficient and poses a hazard to public safety. It also limits the ability of the growing region to attract jobs and tourism."

Clarence Malick of Hudson, who sits on the St. Croix County board, is also a board member of the St. Croix River Association, a group that advocates for protecting the river. He doesn't oppose a new bridge, just the current proposal by the Minnesota Department of Transportation.

Malick was on the short end of a 15-3 board vote on Jan. 4 in support of an exemption. Bachmann might wield more clout now that Republicans control the U.S. House, he said, but he wondered why she would push a bridge proposal when neither Minnesota nor Wisconsin has money to pay for it.

"I think she's forgetting the economy and the tax situation," Malick said. "People are much more tight-fisted with their money right now."